INTRODUCTION

In many respects, William Styron's basic attitudes go against the fashionable intellectual currents of the times. In an age of despair he sounds hopeful, in a society of disbelievers he indicates the paths by which man may recover his spiritual heritage, and in this hour of alienation he affirms man's intrinsic value. Perhaps this "old-fashioned" approach to life accounts for his attraction, and is possibly the reason why he is getting so much critical attention today. For perhaps, every age seeks to discover itself in its "antithetic" as well as its "correspondent" image. The sources of Styron's appeal today point to his definitely religious bias in an age where God has been dead for quite some time now. "although the death of God has been announced over and over again in our culture, it remains true that God is an unconscionable time a-dying."¹ The manifestation of a religious mode of feeling and questioning in Styron's work, points clearly to something that Nietzsche obviously missed. In spite of the secular

¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, "God and the Theologians," Encounter, 21, No. 3 (September 1963), 3.
temper of the "post-Christian" era in which we live, Styron reflects an increasing interest in spiritual doubt and its subsequent resolution.

It is too early or perhaps too hazardous to say whether William Styron, who is the most trenchant voice we have heard from the South in a long time, will emerge as one of the important voices of mid-twentieth century America. It is quite possible that his work may come to mean only a projection of those Southern attitudes which he has undoubtedly inherited from his milieu. But whatever critical response his works might evoke in times to come, they will ever compel attention, projecting as they do, a sweep of American experience geared to the tragic sense of life. It will be difficult to disagree with Robert A. Morris, and Irving Malin's assessment of William Styron's final achievement:

So far, the Confessions crowns his achievement as a novelist. It is fitting that it should. For it demonstrates how the insurrection of the human spirit leads to the resurrection of the artist's soul. This transformation is what any great writer undergoes in wedding his own private vision to enduring values; it is, we think, a transformation William Styron has undergone. Few achievements could be more desirable or more lasting.2

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As Melvin J. Friedman has pointed out, "One can almost map out a three-part program to explain Styron's position: he has tried to prove, mostly from his own example, that the novel is still a plausible art form; he has identified with new movements in fiction and has been especially responsive to the work of the younger creative writers; he has stood out boldly against the crippling influence of established critics who have dominated the literary journals."  

Styron then, first of all, has been the new hope for the novel form, a form which many eminent critics, including Ivor Winters and T.S. Eliot have said is dead or dying. In his introduction to the *Best Short Stories from the Paris Review*, Styron writes sensitively about the genre he has so faithfully championed:

For in point of fact, neither the novel nor by extension prose fiction in general has fallen on bad days, that desolate fancy that assumes that they have been entertained by too many people—by young writers, needlessly, in self-pity; by a few shallow critics, arrogantly, out of self-satisfaction; not to mention a kind of weird self-promotion.

The world of Styron's fiction as he passionately articulated in a letter to the *Paris Review* in 1953, is one of "disorder, 

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defeat, despair," in which Styron's characters despairingly search for "love, joy, hope—qualities which, as in the act of life itself, are best when they have to be struggled for, and not commonly come by with much ease."\(^5\) In defining the experience of his generation for *Esquire*, Styron has given us an insight into his fictional bias:

In 1944, as a Marine recruit I was shanghaied into the "clap shack," the venereal-disease ward of the Naval hospital at Harris Island, South Carolina. There at the age of eighteen, only barely removed from virginhood, I was led to believe that blood tests revealed I had a probably fatal case of syphilis—in those pre-penicillin days as dread a disease as cancer—and was forced to languish, suicidal, for forty days and forty nights amid the charnel-house atmosphere of draining buboes, gonorrhea, prostate massages, daily short-arm inspections, locomotor ataxia, and the howls of poor sinners in the clutch of terminal paresis, until at last, with no more ceremony than if I were being turned out of a veterinary clinic, I was told I could go back to boot camp. I would not die after all, it was all a mistake, those blood tests had turned up a false reaction to an old case of trench mouth. I could have wept with relief and hatred. Such experiences have given our generation, I believe, both the means and the spirit to bridge the generation gap.\(^6\)

Imbued with the post-war consciousness of tragedy and waste, Styron has viewed his own situation as a writer to be vastly

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different from that of those predecessors who seem to have influenced him most. Writers like Faulkner, Wolfe or Fitzgerald, grew up without the trauma of war. Styron's generation, it has often been pointed out, was a generation traumatized by the war experience, by the "unimaginable presence of the bomb and by the feeling that war was perpetual, was in fact the condition of life." 7 Styron's generation was painfully aware of the violence, alienation and dehumanization so characteristic of the Bomb Age. This awareness expressed itself in the thematically unified fiction of the period. The image of modern man in fiction may be summed up by phrases like the "outsider" or "the picaresque saint." Modern fiction, as Ihab Hassan has pointed out, concerns itself with values which emerge from the "inner turbulence of the individual." 8 Modern fiction dramatizes the struggle of man against the nihilistic void left by the loss of traditional values. In his preface to the Myth of Sisyphus, Albert Camus says that the function of literature itself should be "a lucid invitation to live and to create in the very midst of desert." 9 Styron's


9 Albert Camus, preface to The Myth of Sisyphus (London: Hamish Hamilton Ltd., 1955)
characters reach tragic dimensions in their search for values in a world of frenetic and ceaseless turmoil. Styron asserts that the tragic spirit alone can successfully counter the miseries of this age of anxiety. "Of all the peoples in the world," Leslie Fiedler had ventured to say, "we hunger most deeply for tragedy." 10 "As Athens in becoming a great power in its world created a tragic literature that was the supreme expression of its national ideals, so might a sobered America." 11 The people in Styron's novels who destroy, or are destroyed, find true affirmation only in the tragic document. It is this involvement with tragedy that forms the basis of this dissertation.

Born in Newport News, Virginia, in 1925, Styron first intended to find a career in engineering. His father has pointed out Styron's early fascination for words. But it was only when Styron entered Duke University, that he seriously thought of writing as a profession. Most of his early writing is derivative. Autumn, a short story published in *One and Twenty: Duke Narrative and Verse, 1924-1945,* for example, captures an epiphany, a moment of self-realization on the part of a teacher confronted with an arrogant student. Another story, *The Long Dark Road,*

11 Ibid., p. 321.
which anticipates the firebrands, the lynchings, the
whiplash of _The Confessions of Nat Turner_, Styron's latest
novel, tells of a young boy's first experience of a Negro
lynching. It was at Hiram Haydn's course in creative
writing at the New School of Social Research that Styron
conceived the idea for his first novel. He has realized
since that the short story is simply not his forte. He
thinks it is "a limiting form," and that he works much
better in "a larger medium."\(^{12}\)

William Styron's tragic world of fiction functions
within the matrix of the Southern mode of writing. He is
aware that the South has a "definite literary tradition."\(^{13}\)
At the same time, Styron has strongly denied that he works
best when speaking of the South:

I don't consider myself in the Southern
school, whatever that is. _Lie Down in
Darkness_, or most of it was set in the South,
but I don't care if I never write about the
South again, really. Only certain things
in the book are particularly Southern... but I would like to believe that my people
would have behaved the way they did
anywhere. ...\(^ {14}\)

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\(^{12}\) _Interview conducted by Robert S. Morris and Irving
Malin_. in _The Achievement of William Styron_, p. 49.

\(^{13}\) _Interview conducted by Peter Mathiessen and George
in _Malcolm Cowley, ed. Writers at Work_ (New York: The

\(^{14}\) _Ibid.,_ p. 269.
In spite of this denial, Styron has not been able to escape the influence of the "Southern temper," and his work shows characteristics which definitely link him with the Southern school of writing. His concern with the sensuous properties of language and its imaginative use, his assumption that the individual is very much "a creation of time and history," link him to the Southern literary tradition. In a recent interview, Styron seems to have been cured of his earlier unwillingness towards being labelled a "Southern" writer. It has been pointed out that although he "disclaimed being a Southern writer," yet he had "continued to write about the South." Styron now admits that he is still largely obsessed with the South:

Well, I wouldn't stand irrevocably on what I said twenty years ago, because I was in no position to know what I really meant. I think, probably, I had an honest impulse in saying what I did then about not being a Southern writer, and in disclaiming southern roots, but as I go along, I do understand there is still a strong pull in my work toward trying to explain or express certain southern biases, certain southern sympathies, certain southern apprehensions. And there I would amend that to say I was wrong.


17. Ibid.
Styron, then, belongs to the *Southern mode of writing*, and it will be seen that the tragic impulse that runs through his work springs out of the South’s propensity for tragic grandeur, which in turn is a result of its historical past. After its defeat in the Civil War, the South has nurtured an almost obsessive sense of the past, and has regarded itself as the land of lost causes. This is the wellspring of Styron’s tragic art—rooted in the tragic consciousness of a people guilt-ridden by the presence of the Negro, and eroded by military defeat and occupation.

The critical attention accorded to Styron’s novels has always been characterized by mixed feelings of admiration and complaint. Since the publication of *Lie Down in Darkness* in 1951, Styron has remained a prominent writer. But, while his importance among contemporary novelists cannot be denied, there has been so far no truly "objective" estimation of the whole body of his work. Instead, like so many other contemporary writers like Bellow, Mailer, Updike or Malamud, to name a few, Styron has suffered curious and contradictory treatment from critics, who have often praised him for the wrong reasons and attacked him for reasons no less specious. His most recent experience with *The Confessions of Nat Turner* serves as an excellent example of the way critics both for and against seem to have been more interested in addressing each other than in objectively analysing his works.
To date, three full-length studies of Styron's novels have appeared. Robert Fossum's *William Styron: A Critical Essay* (1968), Marc Natner's *William Styron* (1972), and more recently, *The Achievement of William Styron* (1975), edited by Robert K. Morris and Irving Malin. Fossum's essay views Styron's works from the Christian perspective, whereas Natner's book is a thematic analysis focusing on the element of rebellion in Styron's work. The *achievement* is a more comprehensive book, delineating the vision and the values which emerge from Styron's fiction.

Broadly speaking, Styron criticism has taken three or four well-defined directions. One trend seeks to define Styron's regional base, his southern characters, and his preoccupation with the Negro "Problem." Another group of writers has sought to establish Styron's existential predilections, while still others have stressed the element of violence in his works. A recent analysis traces Styron's penchant for protest.

Louis D. Rubin has written in great detail about the nuances that emerge from Styron's southern background. Recently, a dissertation entitled "The Role of the South in the Fiction of William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers and William Styron" devotes itself in

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part to Styron's southernness. Jonathan Baumbach and William Van O'Connor have evaluated the novels of Styron in terms of the loss of innocence and the new world outlook that characterize post-war novelists. William Joseph Swanson, in his dissertation entitled "William Styron: Eloquent Protestant," views Styron as pre-eminently a protest writer, whose protest is exemplified by his attacks on American institutions like the family, Negro slavery, institutional Christianity and the like. Two full length studies have appeared in connection with Styron's technique: Hanna Kay Kime in "A Critical Study of the Technique of William Styron," for example, studies Styron's technical innovations with special reference to *He Down in Darkness* and *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Mary Susan Strine has applied the principle of rhetoric to Styron's work, in her dissertation "The Novel as Rhetorical Act: An Interpretation of the Major Fiction of William Styron." However, the most perceptive criticism of Styron, is focussed around this novelist's leanings towards existentialism. Although Sidney Finkelstein made a brief mention of Styron in his

19 William Joseph Swanson, "William Styron, Eloquent Protestant" (Ph. D. dissertation, University of Northern Colorado, 1972)


existentialism and alienation in American literature (1965), it was left to Lewis Lawson and David Galloway to fully explore the absurd and existentialist element in Styron's work. Lewis Lawson in a critical article has studied Cass Ainsolving, the protagonist of *Jet via House on Fire*, in terms of the Kierkegaardian man of despair; David D. Galloway in his *The Absurd Hero in American Fiction* (1966), has examined the influence of Albert Camus on the work of Styron. Two full length dissertations have been devoted to this aspect of Styron's work. In his thesis entitled, "American Myth and Existential Vision: The Indigeneous Existentialism of Mailer, Bellow, Styron and Ellison,"22 Samuel H. Hux puts forth the view that Styron's existentialism is not simply a matter of borrowing from the European existentialists. He traces Styron's preoccupation with existentialism to the historical collapse of a myth—the myth of the American Dream. Similarly Ray B. Owmbey, in his dissertation "To Choose Being: The Function of Order and Disorder in William Styron's Fiction"23 analyses his works in existential terms.

So far, however, no systematic attempt has been made to

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evaluate Styron in the light of the tragic dimension that emerges from his work. A few critics have made fleeting references to this aspect of Styron's work. Stanley Kauffmann in his analysis of Styron's latest novel, *The Confessions*, says:

Styron is interested in tragedy. Other gifted contemporary American writers have centred on other matters: sensibility, psychology, black (and blue) humour, myth. Styron has not excluded any of these—he could not, by the very nature of his material and times—but his previous big novels, *Big Down in Darkness*, and *Jet This House on Fire* use all these elements to a predominant tragic purpose. Cyril Connolly's familiar dictum—that it is the business of the writer to create masterpieces—has been Styron's law, and to him masterpiece has meant tragedy.

Gunnar Urang, in a similar fashion, praises William Styron for trying to renew the tragic spirit in our times:

Richard Jewell says of literary tragedy: "It puts to the test of action all the formulations of philosophy and religion." and it is, I believe, the high distinction of William Styron to have demonstrated that the art of fiction can, in our time, render a similar service. For he has sought to reinstate the tragic vision in an unheroic age, to project a radical critique of his culture in a period of painful transition, and to envisage redemptive possibilities in a time that is said to mark the death of God.24


There has yet appeared no comprehensive study of Styron focussing on his tragic metaphysics. Such a study, which is attempted here, hopes to reveal how the true "dialectical tension of tragedy" may fruitfully be applied to fiction.

Chapter I of this dissertation seeks to establish that Styron is a tragic writer not only in spite of, but because of his Southern heritage. In a world that is divested of all its patterns of transcendence, Styron posits the tragic stance as the most viable response for coming to terms with life. This chapter seeks to propound a theory of tragic vision, as a frame of reference, to facilitate a study of Styron's works in the light of the tragic tension that emerges from his Southern background.

The four remaining chapters deal with Styron's novels in order of their publication.

Chapter II focussing on *Lie Down in Darkness* (1951), Styron's first novel, serves as an examination of life in the post World War II South. The novel is structured as a Greek tragedy, with its protagonist Peyton Loftis hounded by relentless fate, moving towards her final destruction. The novel offers only the most restrained and muted hope.

of affirmation, symbolised by the Negro revival meeting of Daddy Faith. Setting a tone of almost unremitting bleakness, the novel analyses the destruction of a family, whose personal problems are finally made subservient to the universal problems of guilt, violence, doubt and despair. In many ways, the conflicts of the characters seem to mirror the more pervasive chaos in the world at large. This tone and these themes continue to dominate Styron's fiction, but with the important difference that in the later novels there is an active and powerful progression towards affirmation.

Chapter III analyses Styron's novella *The Long March*, which projects the tragic visionary as a rebel in the face of oppressive forces, which seek to emasculate and dehumanize him. As with all other novels by Styron, revolt is a dominant theme in this novella and the prime cause of tragedy. Styron's Camusian hero Mannix, variously prefigured as Achilles, Prometheus and Sisyphus, mythologizes his experience, thus enhancing the tragic dimension of his condition. In this highly symbolic novel, it is evident that at this stage of Styron's evolution as a writer, rebellion alone must suffice as a way of affirmation. It is a progression, however, from the blindly fated characters of *Lie Down in Darkness*; for in *The Long March*, Mannix
chooses his own destiny, and it is in rebellion that he comes to a higher self-knowledge.

*Set This House on Fire*, which is the subject of Chapter IV, is obviously Christian in its perspective, and dramatizes man's return to faith. Donne's sermon on God's visitations of hell-fire on the sinner to reawaken him to spiritual awareness informs the spirit of the novel. Cass Kinsolving, the central character, experiences a violent crisis of self-discovery. The novel parallels the Sophoclean tragedy of *Oedipus at Colonus*, and is imbued with the feeling of renewal, the peace and self-identification that the blind Oedipus, who has suffered so magnificently, finally achieves at the end of the play.

Chapter V concerns itself with *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, a book which caused a critical furore in the late sixties. It is proposed to analyze this novel in terms of religious tragedy—as a drama between man and God. Nat, the central character of this novel, experiences the disproportion between vision and reality. He rebels in order to vindicate the human value of his existence. Nat stands alone in a hostile universe; destroyed but not defeated, he affirms life-values which have been arrived at through great suffering.

Although in the course of this dissertation, I have
drawn extensively from the various critical estimates of Styron, I have largely depended on my own understanding of the texts while interpreting them in the light of tragic vision. In the analysis that follows, Styron emerges as a writer endowed with deep humanism, committed to a search for faith and affirmation that tragedy alone can provide.
There is only one hope and one guarantee for the future of that which is human; it lies in this, that the tragic disposition shall not perish.

Nietzsche